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ABSTRACT

More than one-half of all college students in the United States and nearly half of all college faculty attend or work at two-year colleges, yet references to them in American fiction are few and far between and usually derogatory. Examples used in an earlier paper on this topic are Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh," Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's "Falling," Joyce Carol Oates's "Them," Gloria Naylor's "The Women of Brewster Place," and T. Glen Coughlin's "The Hero of New York." In all of these works the community college student or teacher is either bored or depressed or, in one case, chooses to attend a community college specifically because it lacks status. Some positive characterizations have appeared recently: a CBS television movie "Nobody's Child"; Lynn Siefert's play "Little Egypt"; and the novels "Oral History" by Lee Smith, "Miami Blues" by Charles Willeford, and "Raney" by Claude Edgerton. But negative depictions continue, Lorrie Moore's "Anagrams" and Jill Eisenstadt's "From Rockaway" being recent examples. Reasons for the near invisibility of two-year college persons in American popular culture are the relative newness of two-year colleges, their lack of glamor due to the low economic status of their membership, and intellectual snobbery toward institutions which must accept every applicant. (A 13-item bibliography is attached.) (MHC)

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The Missing Majority, Part II: The Community College in American Fiction

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THE MISSING MAJORITY, PART II: THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN AMERICAN FICTION

"All art is a reflection of its time." True, but this does not mean that what you see is what there is. Judging by American fiction, there are no people in two-year colleges. Well, maybe an occasional clown. In actuality, more than half of all college students in this country are enrolled in community or junior colleges, and nearly half of all college faculty teach in such schools. What is being reflected in our fiction is their lack of status in our cultural pattern. They are not considered worth talking about, much less taking seriously, even in popular fiction like movies or television, with rare exceptions. And very few of those exceptions, all of them from the recent 1980s, treat two-year college people sympathetically.

In an earlier paper of mine, I discussed the few examples I was able to able to find two years ago. In Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh," thirty-four year old Norma Jean is working on her pectorals and learning to write paragraphs at Paducah Community College. She is strengthening mind and body in order to leave her truck driver husband and her domineering mother. Her story, told in the present tense, concerns a working-class person whose life just sort of happens. In "Shiloh," as in the great majority of cases, the two-year college character is a woman, and the creator is a woman.

In Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's Falling, the central character, in much needed therapy, takes a job at a Chicago City College. When she is more normal she will move on to a four-year school. Her students are morons who like her, there are no standards, there is no scholarship. She enjoys watching the students become semi-morons, however, and at the end of the year is somewhat sorry to leave the school.

In Joyce Carol Oates's Them, the central character, trying to escape

a life of unrelieved grimness and uncontrolled violence, enrolls in a night class at squalid Highland Park Junior College, near Detroit. She decides to marry her English teacher as part of her life-improvement plan, although he is already married and has three children. The part-time English instructor is a shabby graduate student at Wayne State University. They marry, and become what the former student thinks of as "normal."

In The Women of Brewster Place, by Gloria Naylor, most of the characters live in a dying city neighborhood, desperate and abused. An exception is young Kiswana Browne, formerly Melanie Browne, bringing political consciousness to the downtrodden. Near the end, she enrolls part-time in a community college, precisely because such a school has no status and she need not apologize for being upwardly mobile; i.e., not politically correct.

The last work from my first paper was the only one written by a man, and the only one with a male student. In T. Glen Coughlin's The Hero of New York, a bored and failing Business Administration major drops out of a Long Island community college. He is interested only in his waitress girlfriend and his policeman father. He refers to his school as Kinky-Dink College and to his accounting instructor as a turd. At the end, the girlfriend, who dropped him for a rich dope dealer, is taking a community college course in hair cutting.

We who teach in two-year colleges probably know these people, but where are the others, the ones who do not feel that life just happens to them, mostly for the worse.[7] Some of them are just now appearing in American culture. Not in large numbers, but more frequently, and sometimes more sympathetically.

In a CBS television movie starring Marlo Thomas, Nobody's Child, a woman is wrongly institutionalized for twenty years in a Massachusetts

asylum. A community college teacher helps bring about her release, and she moves in with him and his wife. Marie Balter succeeds in the community college as a student, with the help of a tough but understanding woman English teacher. Eventually, she marries and gets a Harvard M.A. The movie is based on a true story, and Marlo Thomas won an Emmy for her performance.

In Lynn Siefert's Little Egypt, a comic play about a battling family living in southern Illinois, a nerdy daughter is called "Egghead" because of her year at a local junior college. Different from her sexy sister, she loves to read. The History of Penicillin is a favorite. She finds happiness with a local goof. They are a likable couple.

In Lee Smith's Oral History, a student at an Appalachian community college tapes the oral history of her colorful relatives as an honors project for her English teacher, Dr. Bernie Ripman of Miami. She and her project form a frame around the main body of the novel--one hundred years of history in Hoot Owl Holler, Kentucky. Her family history is an absorbing weave of folklore, murder, passionate love and witchcraft. The student's contemporary life is more mundane and shallow. In the end frame, she marries Dr. Ripman after she graduates, and they move to Chicago.

Charles Willeford's Miami Blues is a violent detective story focused on a vicious psychopathic killer who takes up with airhead Susan, a Miami-Dade business major and hooker. He attends her English class once, since sarcastic Mr. Turner, teaching haiku to thirty-five sullen students, never recognizes anyone anyway. The detective hero wonders how someone as simple-minded as Susan could be in college. She survives the killer, however, returns to her hometown to marry, and wins a prize for her vinegar pie.

Claude Edgerton's Raney has some of the most sympathetic two-year college characters I have found. A librarian in a Southern community college

marries a former student of the school, despite their different backgrounds. He is more polished, but she is warmer and more open in her backwoods way. Their relationship sometimes gets very close to sexist drivel, but by the the end they have worked out a happy marriage, conquering his snobbish mother and her racist environment.

In Lorrie Moore's Anagrams, the central character is a punning and fantasizing aerobics-for-seniors instructer at a community college in New York. We are barely aware of the college. She does say once, "You might one day wake up and find yourself teaching at a community college; there will have been nothing to warn you. You might say things to your students like, There is only one valid theme in literature: Life will disappoint you."

Last and most recently, there is Jill Eisenstadt's From Rockaway, a slight novel about a tribe of young lifeguards trying to break away from the banality of "Rotaway," New York. Those who fail get nothing jobs or go to junior college. A character who dropped out of Kingsborough Community College in her first year visits the sole escapee at Bennington. In or out of school, these young people are bored and boring vandals.

I was told about a 1985 movie possibly titled One Wonderful Night, but I have been unable to track it down. It concerns a male community college student who has an affair with a female faculty member. The New York Times film review referred to him as a high school student, even though the movie makes it quite clear that he is in college, according to my informant.

In an appendix at the end of this paper, I list four single mentions of two-year college characters, from two novels, a short story and a movie. My entire list is short, and the characters more often than not treated as comic. As far as the second point is concerned, American fiction about characters who attend or teach in four-year colleges and universities more

often than not treats them as comic, also. Many writers favor a satirical depiction of college life, on film or in print.

The difference is that there are thousands of examples of four-year school characters. Why the near invisibility of the two-year people, who comprise half of all college students and faculty? I can think of three possible reasons.

1)The two-year college as a mass cultural pattern is relatively new, appearing about a quarter of a century ago. The experience may be taking a while to emerge. If you look at the dates in the bibliography and the appendix, the majority are in the 1980s.

2)The two-year college may never appear frequently, because of a lack of glamour, a colorless reputation that is connected to the low status of its membership. The major groups enrolled, especially in large cities, are blacks and Hispanics, recent immigrants, and women, many of them older than the traditional college age. These people are usually working-class or underclass. They themselves may see the two-year college as their way up and out, a way to gain more control of their lives, but writers do not often see this common pattern as dramatic or romantic. The feminists, at least, should be writing about the two-year colleges, either for their successes or for their failed promises, but they are not.

3)A kind of intellectual snobbery exists that is connected to my second point, but is distinct. This is more than just a belief in high academic standards. Two-year colleges are not elite. Their intellectual merits often do not compare with four-year schools, who do not have to accept every applicant. The snobbery that refuses to see the upholding of any academic standards is different. Faculty members even at the two-year colleges themselves often give the impression they are stooping. Male faculty, especially, tend to act as if they have been sidetracked somehow

from their true destinies at major universities and businesses, or as writers. Those who actually do write do not use their experiences at two-year schools in their work. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, such experiences are not considered worth talking about, even to those who spend much of their professional lives there.

My earlier paper ended by wondering if these millions of people will remain unstoried and unsung. I think we can see small glimmerings of recognition. Perhaps eventually the community and junior colleges will be reflected in our cultural art forms as we are, a large and varied number of people, in a peculiarly American institution.

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March, 1988

APPENDIX: Single Mentions of Community College Students or Faculty

NOVELS

1. Louis Auchincloss, The House of Five Talents. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960. Pg. 343.
   "Her father was a perfectly respectable druggest in Pasadena who had been able to send his daughter to a junior college." A put-down, said of an inappropriate wife for an Ivy League graduate. He married her because she was pregnant. She later becomes an alcoholic who sleeps around.

2. Larry McMurtry, Moving On. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970. (Paperback issued 1987.) Pg. 266.
   "There was no uncertainty in Clara, not in her movements, her speech, her reports and term papers, her orders in restaurants, or her plans for the future. She always knew what she wanted, and one of the things she wanted was a degree good enough to get a teaching job at some junior college in California. She did not particularly want to get married and she could not conceive of living any place but California." Said of an attractive young graduate student at Rice University.

SHORT STORIES

3. Ella Leffland, "Last Courtesies," from Last Courtesies and Other Stories. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
   Jody, a gum-snapping, stereo-blasting young hooker who lives upstairs of the story's central character, is "taking macrame and World Lit. at the jay cee." Said by her boyfriend, a serial murderer known as the Rain Man.

MOVIES

4. Maid to Order. Released August, 1987.
   "I did not spend six years in junior college to become a maid!" Said by a spoiled young woman, formerly very wealthy, who is about to become a servant.

Coughlin, T. Glen. The Hero of New York. New York: Norton, 1986.

Edgerton, Claude. Raney. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1985.

Eisenstadt, Jill. From Rockaway. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987.

Grant, Lee, dir. Nobody's Child. With Marlo Thomas. CBS, April, 1986.

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Mason, Bobbie Ann. "Shiloh." In Shiloh and Other Stories. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

Moore, Lorrie. Anagrams. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986.

Naylor, Gloria. The Women of Brewster Place. New York: Viking Press, 1982.

Oates, Joyce Carol. Them. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969.

Schaeffer, Susan Fromberg. Falling. New York: Avon Books, 1973.

Siefert, Lynn. Little Egypt. Performed at Steppenwolf, Chicago, November, 1987.

Smith, Lee. Oral History. New York: Putnam, 1983. (Paperback Ballantine, 1984.

Willeford, Charles. Miami Blues. New York: Ballantine, 1984.

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